

Class Size Reduction

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Key Insights from Secondary School
Classrooms

 Springer

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Preface and Research Problem

My personal motivation for writing this book stems from my work with pre-service and in-service teachers working in Hong Kong secondary schools. My interest in how class size reduction (CSR) influences teaching and learning in the English language classroom can be traced back to one of the first teaching practicum visits I conducted as a new teacher educator at the University of Hong Kong. Visiting an in-service teacher who was halfway through her Postgraduate Diploma of Education (PGDE) course in English language teaching, I was pleasantly surprised to walk into a relatively small class of just 18 students ('small' when compared to the norm of 40+ students at that time in Hong Kong). The 40-min English lesson was time-tabled as a speaking class, but it was the teacher who appeared to be getting the most speaking practice as she proceeded to dominate the lesson with more than 30 min of largely one-way, instructional teacher-talk on how best to present a summary in an oral examination. There was virtually no attempt to elicit students' responses or to employ pair or group work in the lesson, and the teacher rarely moved away from whole-class instruction. In my observation notes I penned the following comment to share with the teacher after the class: *'With so few students and so many additional desks and chairs in the room, did you think about breaking the class into smaller groups to promote more discussion and participation between students? Some students are sitting away from their peers in the classroom and have no chance to speak with each other. Why?'* These observation notes formed the basis of our discussion in the post-lesson conference, but when I raised the issue of the small class size, the teacher claimed that it made no difference to her teaching approach. She commented on the students' 'weak' speaking skills (which she offered as a reason for not providing the students with more opportunities for using the language in class or for speaking with each other through pair work activities) and claimed that if all the students were speaking at the same time, it would likely disturb the neighbouring classes. Most revealingly, she acknowledged that she did not change her pedagogy when moving from her other classes (which contained 40 students and more) to this smaller class: *'I teach them the same way, that's what I always do'*.

Research Problem

That classroom visit was 12 years ago, and since then I have conducted more than a thousand observations of in-service and pre-service English language teachers in a range of Hong Kong secondary schools. Class sizes have varied from the smallest (7 students) to the largest (61 students), and while some teachers have excelled in a smaller class, others appear to have found a small class more challenging to teach than a regular-sized class. Those visits have been conducted against the backdrop of an increasingly vocal debate between the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union (HKPTU) and the Hong Kong SAR (HKSAR) Government on whether smaller classes in secondary schools would lead to improvements in student learning. While the teaching unions have argued that an automatic reduction in the number of pupils in a class will lead to better teaching, the HKSAR Government has resisted this call by citing a host of international studies and reviews that have questioned the efficacy of CSR. Although the HKSAR Government finally endorsed the implementation of a small class policy starting from primary one (grade 1) in 2009, there has been no official support for a similar initiative in secondary schools. As a result, it is not unusual for many students in Hong Kong to graduate from primary school having experienced successive years of reduced-class size teaching only to transfer to a secondary school where the class sizes are considerably larger. The lack of official government support for small classes in secondary schools notwithstanding, numerous schools have made their own attempts to split classes or reduce numbers in highly valued subjects like English language believing that smaller classes better facilitate language learning for their students.

This book has three key aims. First, it sets out to make a new contribution to our understanding of how class size mediates teaching and learning through an intensive examination of the different learning processes in large and small English language classes in the under-researched context of secondary schools (grades 7–12). The studies presented in this volume adopt a 'contextually focused perspective' (Graue et al. 2007, p. 673) to examine teaching and learning in large and small classes all situated in Hong Kong, one of the central research sites for class size studies at this moment. It is now widely accepted that attention needs to be redirected away from the heavy influence of econometric analyses and reviews of CSR towards a deeper examination and understanding of the pedagogies and processes that occur in classes of varying size (Blatchford 2011; Finn et al. 2003; Finn and Wang 2002; Anderson 2000, 2002; Grissmer 1999). It has also been noted that the research base on CSR lacks detailed knowledge of how class size shapes teachers' practice (Galton 1998) and how real classroom experiences differ from large classes to smaller ones (Hattie 2009). Bascia and Faubert (2012) ask an important question about what CSR might actually look like close up. Without a detailed examination of what really happens in small classes, it is also difficult to find evidence of what constitutes 'good practice' in such classes and particularly in secondary school classes. I also set out to add to our understanding of how small classes differ from large classes by hearing the student voice, something that is largely absent from previous class size research. As participants in the small class contexts, the student

voice offers a vital source of insight that must not be overlooked at secondary school level. With these points firmly in mind, the studies reported in this book focus solely on the school context and address the following questions:

- What are the main differences in teaching and learning processes in large versus small classes?
- Do teachers really teach small classes in the same way as they do in large classes? (An oft-cited view in the class size literature and reinforced by the earlier anecdote about my observation of an in-service teacher in Hong Kong.)
- What can the student voice tell us about pupils' experiences of teaching and learning in reduced-size classes?
- What are good practices in small class teaching at secondary school level?

These questions are inextricably linked in the studies presented in this book and bring together a number of aspects pertinent to pedagogy, instruction, educational policy, school leadership and curriculum planning. I argue in this book that it is the combination of CSR and this multitude of contextual school and classroom issues that must underpin any examination of how small classes can help to promote maximum benefits in teaching and learning. Research studies that focus purely on the relationship between class size and pupil attainment have often failed to address these crucial contextual factors, but they are still able to shape the discourse around CSR initiatives. This book argues that we need to examine class size issues in different ways and to undertake a more detailed examination of what really happens in small classes.

The need for an overarching conceptual framework to account for class size effects is long overdue, so the second aim of this book is to theorise the relationship between smaller class sizes and learning processes. Although there have been some efforts to address this gap in the class size literature (see Finn et al. 2003; Blatchford 2011; Harfitt and Tsui 2015), attempts to provide theories to help explain class size effects have remained stubbornly atheoretical.

The third and final goal of this book is to provide a more global perspective to our understanding of theoretical and practical issues relating to the class size issue. There exist an impressive number of class size reviews and studies, yet most tend to be dominated by research in the USA and UK, and this does not truly reflect the wider research landscape at present. To address this point, I present recent developments in East Asia, a region where governments have actively sought to reduce class sizes in the last decade. There is something of a paradox about East Asia with students in the region consistently outperforming their Western counterparts on large-scale international studies such as Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). Results from such studies have fuelled claims that small classes might not be as beneficial as proponents of CSR have argued and that Asian students' success might even be attributed to large classes. It is important to address this important issue because large-scale international tests and studies like PIRLS and TIMSS do not present the whole picture of what might be happening in education in a single country or context.

This book inevitably reflects my own perspectives, but is informed by years of exposure to classroom research, teachers and practitioners, school managers, students and administrators in Hong Kong.

Structure of the Book

This book is organised around seven chapters. The first chapter starts by defining key terms and concepts in class size before highlighting the vigorous debate over the merits and demerits of CSR. The first chapter will conclude by positioning Hong Kong as the lens through which the research issue was studied.

Chapter 2 argues for a new approach to researching small classes. I first review the salient research on class size, and then the second part of the chapter heralds the shift away from a reliance on large-scale econometric reviews towards the need for an evidence base on what makes teaching and learning in small classes *different* to larger classes. Next, I present a multiple case study conducted in six Hong Kong secondary schools which adopted a novel approach to examining teaching and learning differences in large and small classes. The data set includes classroom observations and teacher interviews in six pairs of large and reduced-size English language classes where one teacher was working with a large class and a small class at the same grade level. Chapter 3 presents findings from the aforementioned study, but with a focus on six educators in order to address the question of whether teachers really do change their pedagogy when working in small classes. The chapter includes interview data with the six teachers in the case studies and data from multiple lesson observations. Chapter 4 includes the under-researched student voice in the case studies thereby offering an original perspective on how CSR mediates teaching and learning. Chapter 5 reports on a follow-up study of how four teachers working in reduced-size secondary classes adapted their pedagogy as a result of a brokered dialogue between the pupils and myself (as researcher) in each of the teachers' classes. This particular study highlights the importance of the student voice in promoting an alternative and more appropriate pedagogy in small classes. The studies reported in Chaps. 2, 3, 4, and 5 include positive and negative effects of class size on teaching and learning processes.

Chapter 6 will collate some of the overarching themes from the studies reported in the book, drawing on the classroom observations and interviews with teachers and students before presenting a theoretical perspective that seeks to conceptualise the effects of class size on teaching and learning processes. Chapter 7 responds to the four questions posed earlier in this section. It also addresses the crucial issues of good practices in small classes by setting out a future direction for a more purposeful pedagogy in small or reduced-size classes. I conclude the book by consolidating insights gleaned from the studies.

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